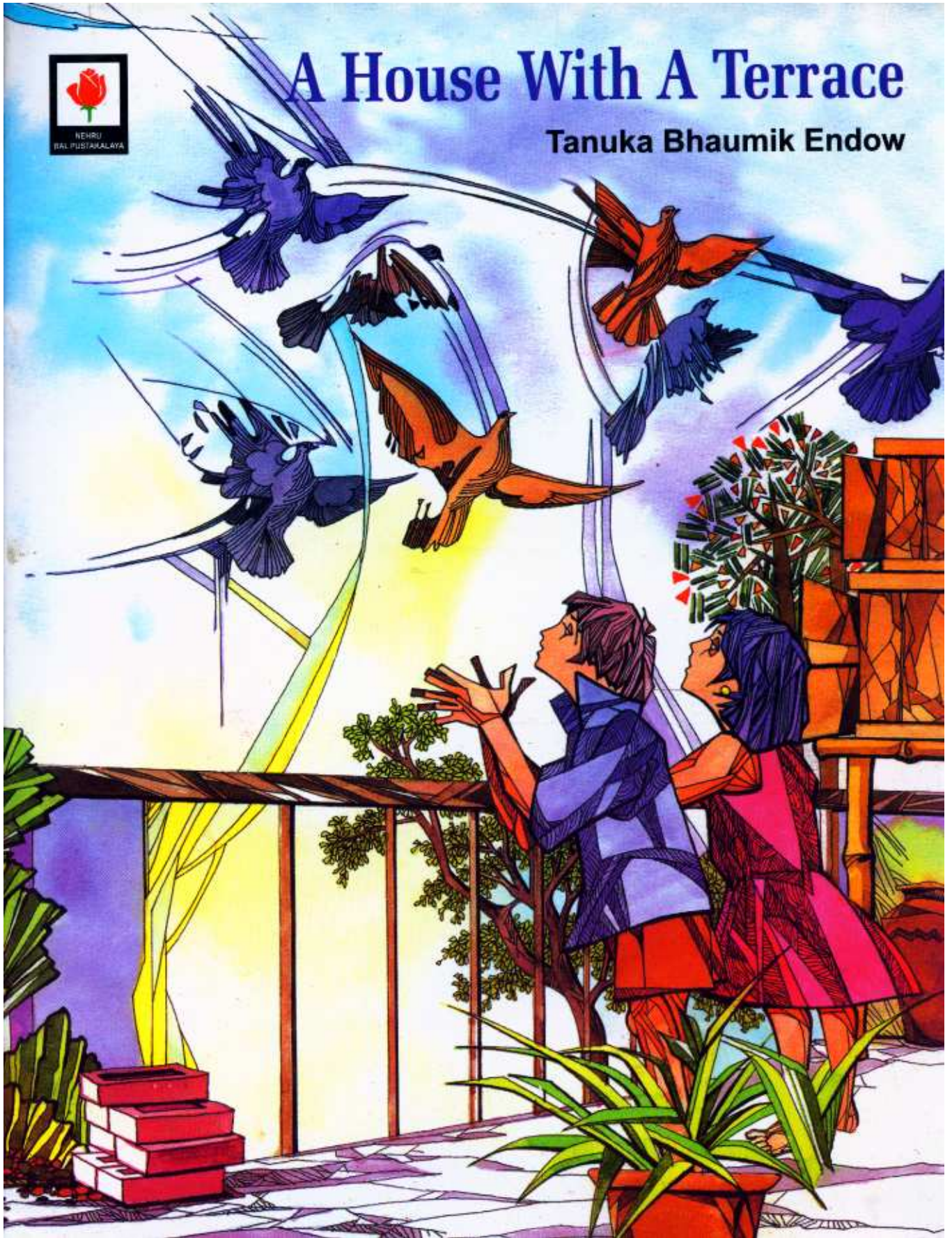




A House With A Terrace

Tanuka Bhaumik Endow





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The house I grew up in had a big terrace. Ma hung the washing on the clothesline there. My elder sister Papu would play there with her friends. As for my brothers Piklo and Tuba, they would spend entire afternoons on the terrace during the kite-flying season. Beautiful kites in red, blue, green dotted the sky and the boys tried hard to cut the threads of other boys' kites with their own. Whenever they managed to do this, they would jump and shout "Bhon-katta-a-a...!"

Babu rarely came up on the terrace, unless it was to catch one of my brothers who, after having got into a scrape, was hiding up there.

The terrace looked beautiful in all weathers. In summer evenings, a lovely breeze from the river blew the fronds of the coconut-trees nearby and the tops of the tall trees swayed from side to side. We spread a mat on the terrace and sat down for a chat. The cool wind



drying our sweat and
blowing through our
hair.

In monsoon,
we stood on the
terrace and watched

black clouds gathering in the sky; enjoying the first fat drops of rain as they fell. Winter afternoons saw us gathered on the terrace, eating 'kul' and lime pickles or enjoying the sour taste of tamarind soaked in oil. Elders stretched out on mats and sunned the winter chill away.

For us children, the terrace was particularly special because it was home to the most wonderful set of birds—a flock of pigeons. They lived in a wooden house made of small cubicles. There must have been at least a dozen pigeons. Grey, white, black and brown—they came in all colours. Their feathers had a lovely shine. The grey pigeons seemed to have a little bit of a rainbow trapped in a ring around their necks. I loved those birds with their soft feathers and tails that fanned out while flying. At certain times of the day, they flew out of their coop in a body and soared high up in the sky. Round and round they went; we clapped our hands and they ventured out even further into the blue world.

We brought up wheat for the birds to eat and scattered it around the terrace. If we held grain in our out-stretched palms, the bold ones did not take long to move closer and start eating out of our hands. With some patience, even the shy ones could be won. Once

they were close, we took the birds in our arms and stroked their warm, soft feathers. Some of the pigeons loved to show off. Perched on the railing of the terrace, they ruffled up the feathers around their neck and twirled round and round, all the time cooing deep from their throats.

The days flowed by in a happy wave in our house with a terrace. But one summer afternoon, I came home from school to find Ma looking upset. She had a distracted air about her and her usual sunny smile was missing. When my elder brothers and sister returned home from school, they also felt that something was amiss.

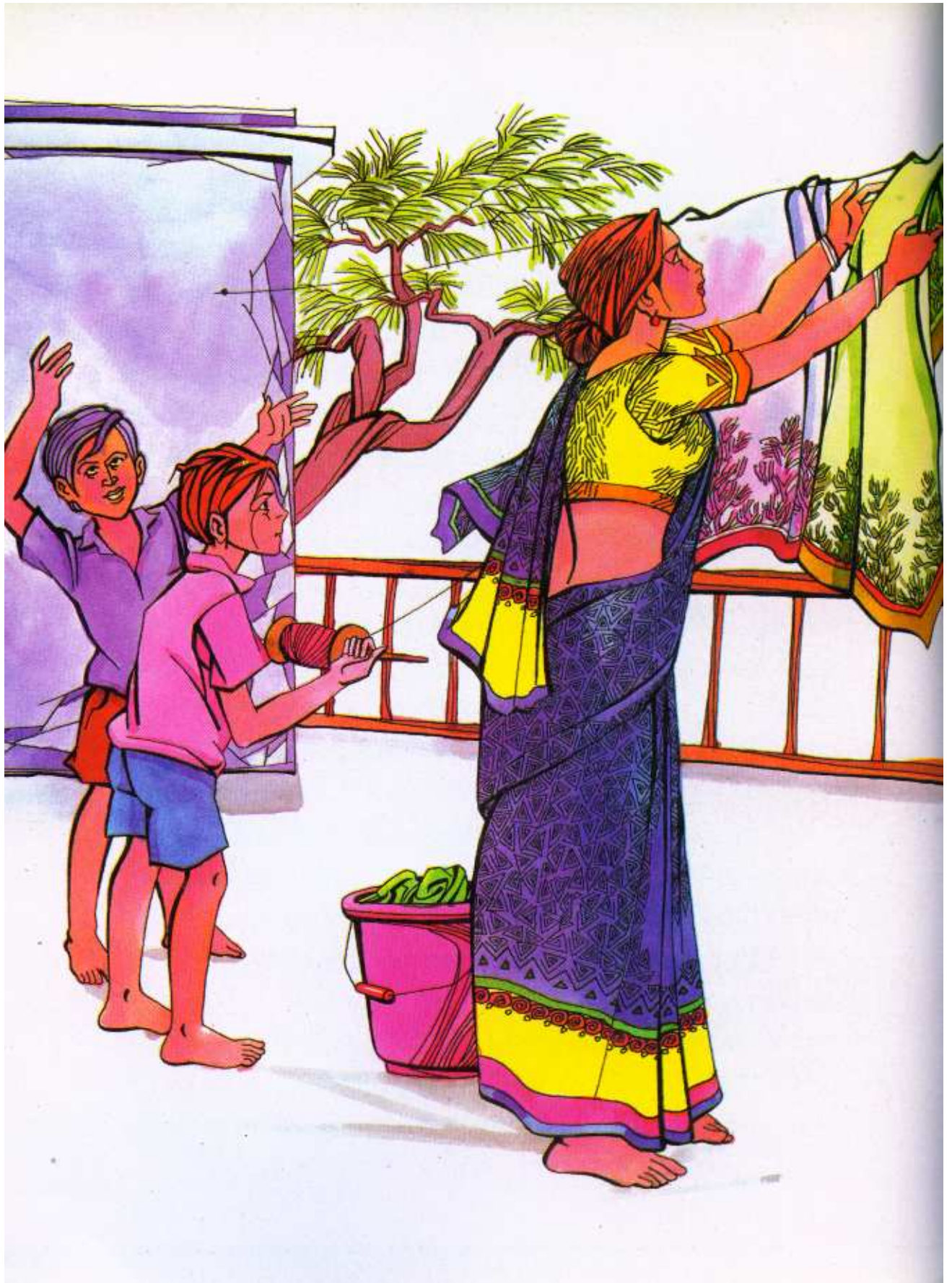
"Is something wrong, Ma?" Asked Papudidi, the eldest.

"I have some bad news for you, children," replied Ma in a low voice. "We may have to leave this house."

"Oh, no!" We shouted in dismay.

"But why Ma? Why must we leave?" Asked my brothers.

"You see, the landlord wants to raise the rent. We cannot afford to pay a higher rent right now. So your father will start looking for a house and we shall leave





in two months.”

A sudden thought struck me, “Will the new house have a terrace, Ma?”

“I doubt it. We cannot get such a big house and a terrace at the present rent.”

“Then what about the pigeons? Where shall we keep them?” I was frantic with worry.

Papudidi, Piklu and Tuba all anxiously waited for an answer.

“I am afraid we will have to leave them behind, my dears.”

The next day we had an emergency meeting on the terrace. We had talks and arguments, but none of us could come up with a solution.

Papudidi shook her two plaits and looked seriously through her glasses. “We must do something. We just cannot leave Kalu, Dolly, Mithu and all the other birds behind! They will die of sadness.”

“And what about the terrace?” Asked Tuba, his fair round face anxious as a thought occurred to him. “Where will we fly our kites? We’ll have to go out on the streets to do that and it’s too dangerous.”

We all felt gloomy as the full impact of the news



sank in. The terrace was like a friend to us; we'll lose a dear friend.

Piklu, the elder of the two brothers, came up with a suggestion.

"How about making the word go round that this house is haunted? We could do all kinds of spooky things and then the landlord will not be able to rent it out to anyone else. Other people will be too scared to rent this house."

"Good idea, Piklu! How shall we do the haunting?" Asked Tuba, quite excited by the idea.

"We'll dress up as ghosts and frighten everybody!"

Piklu was the artistic type and was already thinking of costumes and wigs for dressing up as a ghost. His thin, lively face mirrored many expressions as ideas sailed through his head. But Papudidi was not so happy with the idea.

"Don't be silly, Piklu. Sooner or later, Ma and Babu will get to know and that'll be the end of it. You know that they'll never support us in these pranks."

The next idea came from Papudidi. "How about all of us going and speaking to the landlord? We could ask our friends to come with us? Surely the landlord will



find it hard to refuse so many children.” We all agreed to try out this plan. But this time it was Ma who turned it down.

“No, children, I am afraid this is not done. It would be too much like begging for the house and I am sure your father will not like it. I, too, am not quite happy with the plan. Why do you feel that the new house won’t be nice? You may perhaps not get a house

with a terrace, but other things may be good.”

We muttered ‘yes’, but felt heart-broken at the thought of leaving our terrace and our pets.

Sunday brought a fresh surprise. We were scattered around the living room, studying. Tuba and Piklu were hurriedly finishing their homework because soon their friends would come to call them for a cricket-match. I was sitting on the floor, sorting my books, and Papudidi was lost in solving some difficult sums. Babu left the balcony where he had been reading the newspaper and came inside.

“So, children, how is the work going? Manu, have you finished your homework?”

“Yes, Babu,” I answered and the others also replied.

“Well, there’s something I must tell all of you. We shall have a visitor in the evening; the gentleman who owns this house.”

“Oh, no!” He could hear the dismay in our voice.

“I know you may not feel like welcoming him right now. Ma has told me how upset all of you are about leaving this house. But please remember, he is our guest and you must be polite to him.”

We nodded, but felt that it was unfair to be asked to welcome the one single person we disliked most at the moment!

“He will come for some discussions and stay for tea. I hope you won’t let your mother and myself down.” Babu continued. “And please remember, no pranks!”

All afternoon Ma was busy preparing her special ‘gokul pithe’ with sweet potato. We sniffed the mouth-watering smell coming from the kitchen and angrily muttered under our breath.

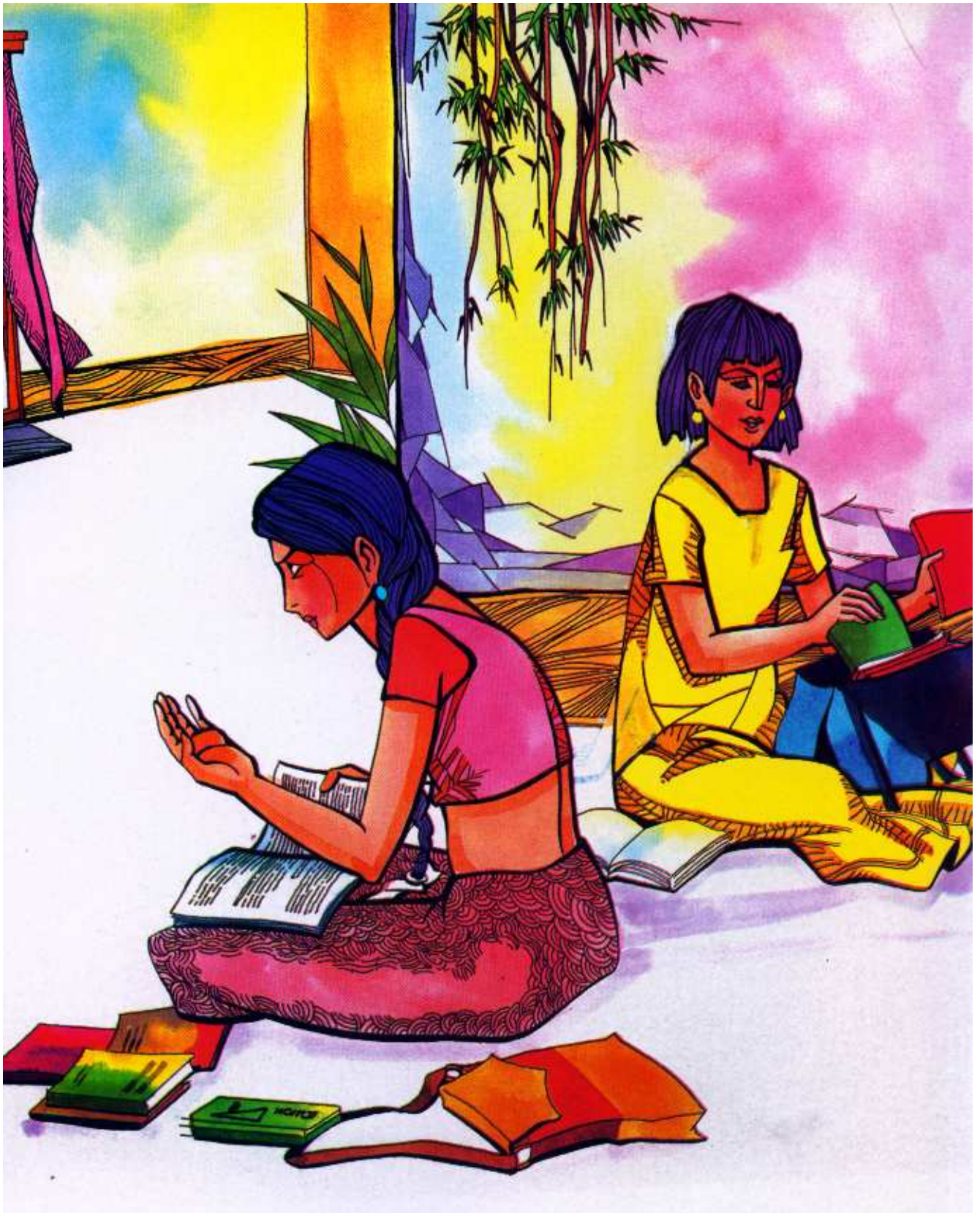
“Such good stuff made for that horrible man who is making us leave this house!” Tuba was really upset.

Piklu said he had a good mind to put salt in the sweets to spoil them.

Papudidi shushed him, “No, Piklu! That will put Ma in a tight spot.” But even our gentle Papudidi was upset at the way things were shaping, “It is so unfair that we have to welcome this awful man!”

“I wish we could train the pigeons to attack him when he comes,” said Tuba.





It did sound like a wonderful idea.

"He'd get pecked all over, run away and never come back here again," I said gleefully.

But afternoon turned into evening and our unwelcome guest arrived without inviting any attack from the birds. To our surprise, there was a small boy with him, a boy of about my age, nine or ten years old. But he was thin and a little sad.

"Rahul, come and meet the children," called Mr Sen, the landlord, who looked younger than we had expected. "This is my son, Rahul. Rahul, meet all your new friends."

While we were telling the new boy our names, I heard Mr Sen add in a low voice to Babu, "Ever since his pet dog died, Rahul has become very quiet. Doesn't want to play, doesn't want to talk to anyone."

"Why don't you children take Rahul to the terrace?" Suggested Babu. "I am sure he'll like it in the open and all of you can play some games."

We called Rahul and, after a bit of cajoling, he followed us slowly up the stairs. Once on the terrace, we soon forgot the silent boy and got busy with our games. After a while, we went downstairs and fetched some



wheat for our pet pigeons.

"Kalu, Mithu, Dolly!" I called. The pigeons came out of the coops. The slow sunset had already streaked the sky with red and we clapped our hands to make the pigeons have a last round in the sky before it became too dark. They rose with a swish of their wings and were soon soaring across the beautiful evening sky. Suddenly I noticed Rahul standing next to me, watching the birds with wonderstruck eyes.

Later on, when the birds came back, we fed them a little wheat from our palms. Dolly was perched on my palm and pecking at the grains. Again I found Rahul watching, craning his neck to get a proper look at the pigeon. His eyes were shining and there was a glimmer of a smile on his lips, the first of the evening!

"Would you like to feed Dolly?" I asked him.

"Is that her name—Dolly?"

"Yes. Do you want to give her some wheat?" I asked again.

"Yes—but what if she bites me?"

"She won't bite," I couldn't help smiling. "And anyway, their beaks are very soft. Her pecking won't

hurt you at all, unless she attacks someone. Here, take some wheat,” and I gave Rahul some wheat to feed the bird.

He held out his hand shyly and waited for the bird to come and sit on his hand. After a few false attempts, Dolly perched comfortably on his hand and was eating from his outstretched palm.

By this time, all my brothers and sisters had gathered around us, watching happily. Even though Mr Sen was a hateful man, taking away our terrace and pigeons, we liked this shy little boy and were happy to see him smiling at last!

While Rahul was feeding Dolly, I looked for Kalu. He was one of our favourites; a black pigeon with lovely shining feathers. But Kalu was nowhere to be seen. I looked inside all the cubicles of the coop but he was not inside any of them. Then I went around the terrace. Perhaps he was perched on the wall in a corner or may be he was wandering around behind the water-tank. But no, there was no sign of Kalu anywhere.

Alarmed, I shouted: “Papudidi! Papudidi! I can’t find Kalu anywhere!”

Papudidi rushed over and began to look for Kalu. Piklu and Tuba, too, joined in the search, with Rahul quietly looking on. But we just could not find the black pigeon.

Meanwhile dusk had deepened and Babu came up with Mr Sen to call us.

“Rahul...” called Mr Sen.

“Baba!” Rahul ran to his father, all excited. “I fed a pigeon! She ate from my palm!”

Babu meanwhile had taken one look at our faces and guessed that something was wrong.

“What’s the matter, children?” He asked gently.

“Babu, we can’t find Kalu,” I said, close to tears. “We searched and searched, but he seems to have disappeared.”

“Has this ever happened before?” Enquired Mr Sen. “I mean, has any pigeon ever gone missing before?”

“No, Sir,” replied Tuba. “They all know their way to the house and always come back to the coop.”

Both men stood considering the matter.

“Do you think that he might have had an accident?” Babu suggested.

“Yes, that can happen,” said Papudidi, “But then



I suppose we'll find him somewhere near our house."

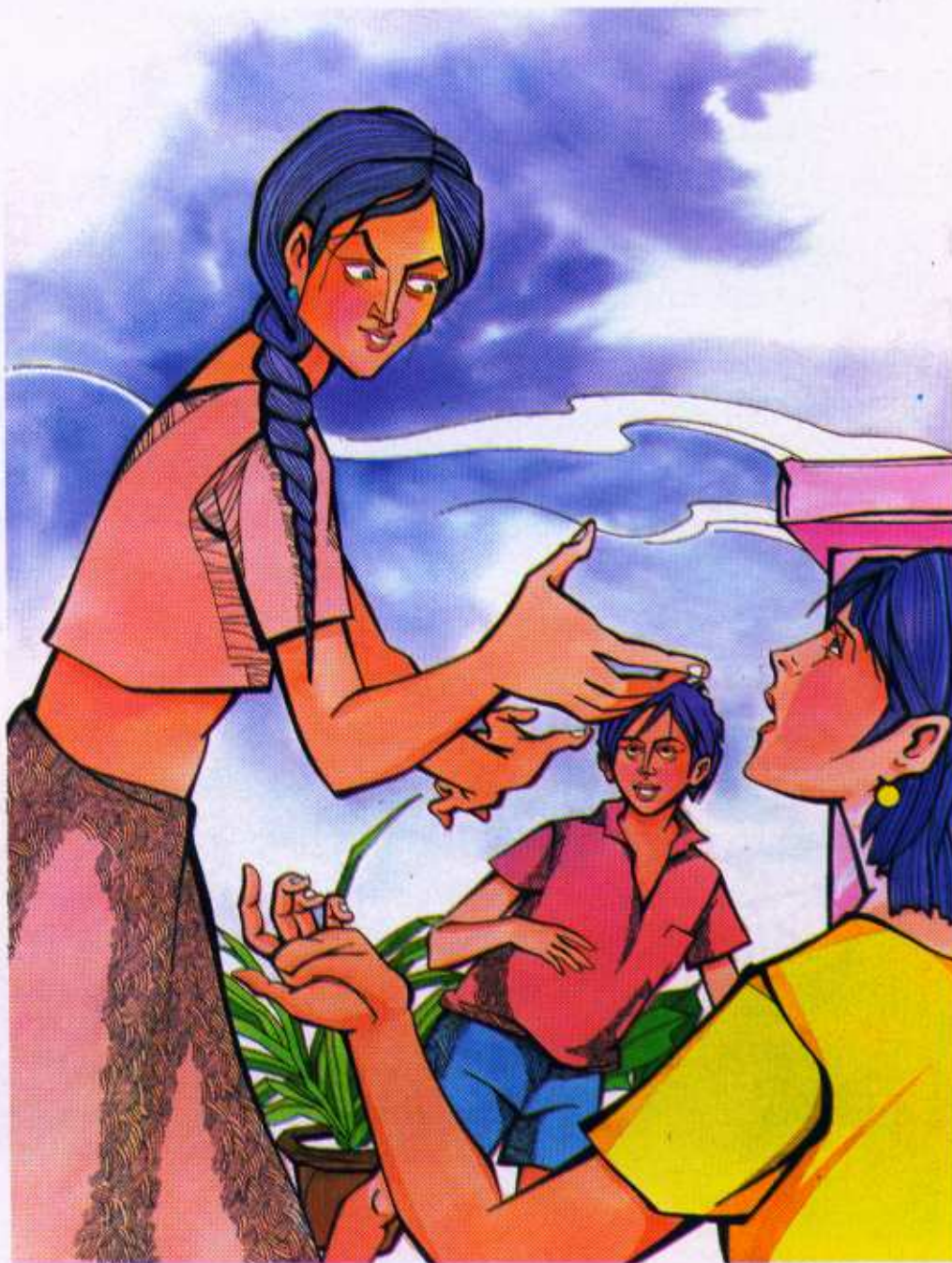
"Why don't we all go downstairs for tea now?" Suggested Babu. "You children have some samosas and sweets; all of you will feel better. Who knows, you may find Kalu happily sitting in his coop tomorrow!"

But Kalu did not come back the next day, or the day after. One after the other, days passed and we climbed the stairs to the terrace hoping to find Kalu only to be disappointed. The only silver lining was that we gained a new friend—Rahul. He was enchanted by the pigeons and often came to our house. Slowly his shyness went away and he became very friendly with all of us.

With the arrival of monsoon came 'rath-yatra', a festival we eagerly waited for. We children decorated small wooden raths or chariots with paper-chains and put clay idols of Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra inside them. These godly brothers and their sister are worshipped on the day of the 'rath-yatra' every year. We took the wooden raths out on the road and pulled them with strings.

The local fair held for this festival—popularly known as 'rath-er mela' — was a wonderful place to

roam about in. So Tuba, Piklu and I went along to the fair in the afternoon. When we reached the fairground,



it was already bustling with activity. Many stalls had been put up, where people were selling plants, toys, household items, furniture and various other things. Delicious aroma wafted from different kinds of mouth-watering dishes being sold. Hot orange-coloured jalebis deep-fried in huge pans, crisp kachoris and samosas lined up in trays, delicately flaky phuchkas sold in sal-leaf cones along with tamarind-water... the list was endless. Amidst all this, I spotted a woman selling beautiful toys.

“Oh, come and look at those cute little pots and pans!” I called out to Piklu and Tuba as I stared at the toy pots and pans, which looked so real. They would be just right for my dolls’ house kitchen.

“Come on, Manu! Stop looking at these silly things!” Tuba tried to drag me away as I stood rooted to the spot. Piklu and Tuba were not interested in such kiddish stuff. Piklu then tried to distract me.

“Hey, Manu, look! Such wonderful birds!”

I turned my head to look and really, a man was standing there, selling such lovely, colourful birds. Small multi-coloured budgerigars that twittered constantly, some talking mainas and cockatoos, and even

some gay pigeons. They reminded me of Kalu and tears welled up in my eyes. Piklu and Tuba must have felt the same, because they turned and started moving away. Suddenly a white pigeon flew over and sat on Tuba's shoulder.

The shopkeeper came hurrying over. Meanwhile Tuba and Piklu were petting the lovely pigeon. I, too, wiped away my tears and petted the beautiful bird before the man came and snatched it away.

None of us were in the mood to enjoy the fair anymore.

"I wish Kalu would come back, don't you?" I sighed, as we walked down the road on our way back home. Tuba and Piklu nodded silently, too upset to speak. Suddenly Piklu pointed at my hand.

"Manu, what is that white stuff you have got there?"

Startled, I looked down and sure enough, there were quite a few white marks on my palm.

"Must have brushed my hand against a white wall," I said.

"It looks like paint," said Tuba. "Hey, wait a minute... Didn't you pet the white pigeon just now? It

must have come off it.”

“But you, too, stroked it with your hand,” I protested.

“That’s true,” said Tuba, puzzled.

“Was your hand wet, Manu?” Asked Piklu in a strange voice.

“Yes. Yes, it was,” I said, remembering how I had wiped away my tears before petting the bird.

“The pigeon was painted white...” Piklu slowly stated as if making a discovery.

All three of us stopped in our tracks as the meaning of the thought struck us.

“My God!” I shouted. “What if it was Kalu? Suppose the bird-seller stole Kalu and changed his colour?”

Tuba remembered how the white pigeon had flown directly to him.

“He came and sat on my shoulder as if he knew me.”

We decided that we had to take a chance and go back to find Kalu. We prayed that he had not been sold already. But how would we get hold of the bird? We didn’t have enough money to buy it and we couldn’t

"But you know, the bird-seller just saw all of us," Piklu was doubtful. "He'll just shoo us away and since we are kids, we cannot challenge him. No-one will believe us."

"Arrey, children, what are you doing here?" A familiar voice called out to us. "Hurry on home now, your mother will be worried about you. It's already dark." We turned around to find Arjunda, the young driver who worked for us, on his way back home. We were all fond of him as he told us interesting stories about his life in the village. Soon we were pouring out the whole story to him, hoping to find a solution. Arjunda listened with rapt attention and clapped us on the back as we finished.

"You kids have done well to spot the paint! Good for you! These bird-sellers do it all the time, painting birds up in different colours to make them look exotic! And perhaps Kalu also, so that no-one can recognize him."

Tuba and Piklu coaxed Arjunda into talking to the bird-seller.

"Okay, okay, I'll help you," agreed Arjunda. "I'll ask him to show me some pigeons, especially the white

ones. When I look at them, you call out for Kalu. If he flies out to you, just take him and run. And remember, don't show your faces to the bird-man, he may get suspicious if he spots you."

Excited with the thought of rescuing Kalu, we tip-toed to the bird-stall and waited at a place from where the bird-seller could not see us. Arjunda went up to the man and asked him to show some birds. After looking at some mainas, he enquired about the white pigeon. The bird-seller took the pigeon out of the cage, but would not give him over to Arjunda. He held the bird and showed him off, reeling off his good points.

"What shall we do?" Tuba was getting agitated. "He is not giving the pigeon to Arjunda. Should I call out anyway?"

"Wait, Tuba!" Piklu and I whispered anxiously, worried that our plan may go awry.

But Tuba, unable to wait any longer, had already let out a piercing cry, "K-a-a-a-l-u-u-u-u...!"

The cry rang in the air. And sure enough, the white pigeon became restless, flapped his wings excitedly and tried to fly away. But the bird-seller was quick and held on to him with a tight grip, trying to calm





the bird down. All this time his eyes were searching all around the place, trying to locate the call. The three of us watched with sinking hearts. We were all certain now that the white pigeon was indeed our bird, but we had lost the chance to rescue him. Now Kalu would be put back into the cage and we'll go home empty-handed.

Just then something wonderful happened. Kalu suddenly turned to the bird-seller furiously flapping his wings and started pecking at the man's eyes. The bird-seller could not counter this sudden attack and his grip loosened. Kalu, freed himself and soared up and up into the night-sky.

Arjunda quickly retraced his steps and sneaked back to us. We gave him a hug and crowded around him.

"Thank you, Arjunda! Thank you so much!"

"No need to thank me. He did it himself, didn't he?" Laughed Arjunda. "But where did he go? How will you get him back?"

"Kalu doesn't want to show his face around here right now in case the man catches him again," guessed Piklu.

"I am sure he will find us very soon or at least he will find the way home," Tuba, too, was confident.

We bade goodbye to Arjunda and started walking back home. It had become dark and the streetlights threw gleaming reflections on the rain-drenched street. Suddenly, we heard the flapping of wings and a ghostly white pigeon flew down from the darkness to settle on my shoulder.

"Oh, Kalu!" I took him in my arms and cuddled



him. "We found you at last!"

There was a little celebration at home once we were back and the white paint taken off Kalu to reveal the gleaming black feathers. Babu, Ma and Papudidi listened to our story wide-eyed. Ma could not help scolding us for taking risks, but the joy of getting Kalu back overrode everything else. In the middle of the chatting and the laughter, I remembered that we would have to leave all the pigeons anyway, since we had to leave our house with the terrace.

"What's the matter, Manu?" Babu noticed that I had suddenly become sad.

"Oh, I just remembered that we'll soon have to leave this house and the pigeons as well," I muttered, sorry to remind the others about the problem.

"Oh, that!" I was amazed to see Babu smiling. "I forgot to tell you in all this excitement. The problem has been solved, at least for some time."

"What? When? How?" Piklu, Tuba and I shouted in a chorus.

"You see, Rahul pointed out to his father that if we go from this house, many problems will crop up. The pigeons will lose a home. We have reared them for

a long time and given them a good home. The next tenant may not like birds... Most important, Rahul has grown very fond of the pigeons and wants to be able to come and play with them regularly. Giving all this a serious thought, his father decided that we may continue to stay here at the present rent.”

“Wow! What a day!” Cried Tuba. “All good things are happening today.”



"Yes," agreed Piklu. "We got Kalu back and now our house has been returned to us."

"I think those wonderful birds deserve a treat, don't you?" Suggested Babu. "Papu, Tuba, Piklu and Manu, how about coming with me tomorrow to buy a new pigeon coop?"

"Oh, yes," we all cried out in excitement. "That'll be a wonderful gift for our feathered friends!"





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